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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest synthesizes current attitudes on library censorship in the public schools, as reflected in state statutes and federal court cases. Separate sections describe the rise of censorship, recent court cases and incidents related to library censorship, who the censors are, what is being censored, a framework for academic freedom in schools, and a distinction between selection and censorship. Following a discussion of the recent rise of censorship in the nation's classrooms and school libraries, a comparison of the views of proponents of academic freedom and the views of proponents of censorship is offered. Recent court cases and incidents related to library censorship are offered as examples of the recent challenges coming from the conservative side of the political spectrum by leaders such as Phyllis Schlafly, Jerry Falwell, and Mel and Norma Gabler. Examples of the most frequent targets of protests are followed by a framework which librarians and other decision makers may use to maintain the right of academic freedom. This framework holds that educators may use methods, symbols, or materials (1) relevant to the subject matter being taught, (2) not in violation of valid laws, (3) compatible with current standards of decency, (4) reasonable for students' level of maturity, (5) intended for a legitimate educational purpose, and (6) unlikely to result in substantial disruption of school activities. A distinction between selection and censorship is made and the importance of sustaining a commitment to the concept of academic freedom is emphasized. (LH)

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# LIBRARY CENSORSHIP

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# LIBRARY CENSORSHIP

by Leslie Hendrikson

Occasionally, there are objections to materials contained in school libraries voiced by parents, local special interest groups, or even national organizations whose philosophies run counter to the ideals of academic freedom. When such a conflict occurs, librarians, teachers, and other decision makers must be prepared to respond. School librarians should be well informed about the current status of academic freedom, which is the judicial refuge of educators when, in legitimately representing the broad interests of education, their selection of materials choices offend the community or some of its organizations.

This ERIC Digest synthesizes current attitudes on library censorship in the public schools, as reflected in state statutes and federal court cases. Separate sections describe the rise of censorship, recent court cases and incidents related to library censorship, who the censors are, what is being censored, a framework for academic freedom in schools, and a distinction between selection and censorship.

**The rise of censorship**

Since the mid-1970s, the number of books banned from the nation's classrooms and school libraries has shown an alarming increase. Supplementary readings in literature and the social studies are among the targets of this growing movement. While proponents of academic freedom hold that skills involved in critical thinking can best be developed in an atmosphere that encourages discussion in which "the essence of truth is the healthy presence of controversy" (Hart 1983, 94), censorship advocates organize their attacks around the following themes: (1) secular humanism, which critics say abounds in schools in the form of values clarification, situation ethics, sex education, and evolution as a "religion," should not be taught in public schools; (2) the "basics" should be the limit of a student's educational experience; (3) parents should have the right to determine what their children read; and (4) critics should have "equal time" devoted to the presentation of conservative ideas (Parker and Weiss 1983).

With these rallying cries in mind, a look at two recent surveys suggests that the censorship movement is indeed on the increase. One survey reported that efforts to censor materials in public schools rose 37 percent from 1984 to 1985 and 66 percent from 1982-83 to 1985 (Carter 1985). An earlier survey, conducted by the American Library Association, the Association of American Publishers, and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, found that one-fourth of school administrators reported increases in challenges to instructional materials (Kamhi 1981).

**Recent court cases and incidents related to library censorship**

Until 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court had not decided whether certain legal rulings concerning censorship were constitutionally correct. However, in *Pico v. Island Trees Union Free School District* (1982), the Court ruled that the school board must go on trial to show that it had a valid purpose in withdrawing a number of books from its school libraries. Six years and three court battles later, the banned books were returned to the shelves after the U.S. Supreme Court declared: "Our Constitution does not permit the official suppression of ideas" (Parker and Weiss 1983, 6).

Despite this landmark case, a number of recent censorship attempts have been reported, including the following.

1. Early in 1983, 146 volumes of *The American Heritage Dictionary* were removed from a Folsom, California, school because they contained 13 "inappropriate" words.
2. In 1983, a petition containing 748 signatures urged the removal of *Of Mice and Men* from an Alabama high school.
3. The publishers of five major homemaking tests were forced to revise all 1982-83 editions to ensure that definitions of "nontraditional families" were excluded (Parker and Weiss 1983).

**Who are the censors?**

Although battles over textbooks, library books, and other educational materials are not new, some of the most recent challenges have come from the conservative side of the political spectrum, including Phyllis Schlafly's "Eagle Forum" and Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority" (Clark 1982). Another important leadership influence has been exerted by Mel and Norma Gabler's textbook consultant service, incorporated as "Educational Research Analysts, Inc.," which concentrates on the elimination of textbooks deemed "un-American" and "anti-Christian" and containing "aesthetic humanism." The Gabler evaluations have received widespread recognition as reflected in the ALA's findings that 50 percent of textbook controversies reported by state education officials were somehow linked to Gabler textbook evaluations (Clark 1982).

**What is being censored?**

In his comparative analysis of six censorship surveys published between 1963 and 1983, Ken Donelson ranked the most frequent targets of protests: *Catcher in the Rye, Of Mice and Men, Forever, Go Ask Alice, The Grapes of Wrath, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Deenie, Then Again, Maybe I Won't, Brave New World,* and *Lord of the Flies.* The two most widely protested authors were John Steinbeck, with seven titles, and Judy Blume, with five titles (Donelson 1985).

**A framework for academic freedom in schools**

By analyzing state educational statutes and court decisions, it is possible to construct a framework within which librarians and other decision makers may exercise their rights of academic freedom. Such a framework is offered by Smalls (1983), who contends that an educator may use methods, symbols, or materials (1) relevant to the subject matter being taught, (2) not in violation of valid laws, (3) compatible with current standards of decency, (4) reasonable for students' levels of maturity, (5) intended for a legitimate educational purpose, and (6) unlikely to result in substantial disruption of school activities (Smalls 1983, 548).

In addition to this framework for exercising the rights of academic freedom, the ALA's "Library Bill of Rights" further endorses academic freedom by specifically stating that "libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment," and that "materials should not be prescribed or

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removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval" (Parker and Weiss 1983).

**Selection or censorship?**

The National Committee for Citizens in Education, an organization for citizen participation in the public schools, draws the following distinction between censorship and the selection of materials by school officials: "Selection is a positive action. It exercises democratic choice and protects freedom of thought. Censorship is negative and authoritarian. It seeks to channel thought and shield readers from ideas" (Clark 1982, 13).

Thus, the concept of academic freedom forms the foundation for democratic education and, by implication, for a democratic society. Challenges to educational libraries which repress the free exchange of ideas must be met and a commitment to academic freedom in the public schools must be sustained. In short, "Access to ideas. . . prepares students for active and effective participation in the pluralistic society in which they will soon be adult members" (Justice William Brennan 1983).

**RESOURCES**

Following is a bibliography of resources, including references in this Digest. Those entries followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and available in microfiche and/or paper copy from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For price information write EDRS, P.O. Box 190, Arlington, VA 22210.


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